Canada’s confirmed COVID-19 vaccine deliveries so far fall short of expectations for first half of 2021

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Workers unload a shipment of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine at the FedEx hub at Pearson International Airport in Toronto on May 20, 2021.

COLE BURSTON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

Uncertainty around deliveries from Moderna and other drug makers means Canada could receive millions fewer doses of COVID-19 vaccines than the totals previously expected by the end of June, officials said Thursday.

Since April, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Procurement Minister Anita Anand have said Canada will receive a cumulative total of between 48 million and 50 million doses by the end of June. But at a Thursday vaccine briefing officials significantly dampened expectations, saying the country has only confirmed deliveries for about 40 million doses for the first half of the year, meaning the administration of second doses could happen at a slower pace than hoped for just a few weeks ago.

In doubt are shipments of the Moderna and AstraZeneca vaccines which, while previously announced by the government, have not yet been confirmed by the drug makers.

"From a distribution perspective we can confirm up to 40 million doses by the end of June," Brigadier-General Krista Brodie told reporters at her first press conference as the leader of Canada's vaccine distribution and logistics.

"Should additional natures of vaccines come on line as we move through the month of June then that will add to that number and continue to push it upwards," she said.

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So far, Pfizer-BioNTech has been the workhorse of Canada's vaccine rollout both because it has the most reliable deliveries and also because the federal government has steadily bought more doses from the company. But Ottawa is also relying on substantial deliveries from Moderna (which has struggled to meet its delivery targets) and, to a lesser extent, vaccines made by Oxford-AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson, which have unclear delivery dates.

In April, Moderna cut expectations for deliveries between April and June to at least 10.3 million doses, down from 12.3 million. Officials appeared less confident Thursday that the company will meet that already lowered target.

"We're still working with Moderna ... on determining their firm delivery over the month of June and then we're working with AstraZeneca on one million doses by the end of June," said Joelle Paquette, a director-general with Public Services and Procurement Canada.

To meet its minimum delivery target of 10.3 million doses between April and June, Moderna has less than six weeks to send 6.6 million doses. The company's deliveries arrive approximately every two weeks, and the largest shipment yet of 1.2 million doses arrived in Canada on Thursday. No date has been announced for the next delivery.

Exports of the version of the AstraZeneca vaccine made at the Serum Institute of India were stopped in March, amid a COVID-19 crisis in India. On Tuesday, the company said it hopes to start deliveries again by the end of this year.

Asked whether Canada will still receive a total of at least 48 million doses by the end of June, Ms. Paquette said: "From the beginning our goal has been to have enough doses to vaccinate eligible Canadians by the end of September and I can say that we are on track to meet that goal."

On April 16, Ms. Anand said Canada would receive "between 48 to 50 million doses of vaccine by the end of June." On April 27, Mr. Trudeau said, "Canada is positioned to receive close to 50 million doses of vaccine before the end of June."

On Thursday, Moderna did not directly say whether it will still meet its June delivery target.

"Moderna continues to scale up vaccine manufacturing and remains fully focused on delivering vaccines to customers in Canada and around the world. We remain in close contact with our federal government partners," Patricia Gauthier, manager of Moderna's Canadian operations, said in a statement.

So far, COVID-19 vaccines have been approved in Canada for people 12 and older – approximately 33 million people. The only shots currently in use in Canada are two-dose vaccines, meaning at least 66 million doses are required to fully vaccinate eligible Canadians. Health Canada has approved the single-shot Johnson & Johnson vaccine but the first shipment of the vaccine is undergoing a quality-assurance review from the federal regulator.

Brig.-Gen. Brodie was appointed to run the vaccination campaign on Monday after Major-General Dany Fortin stepped aside last week amid a sexual-misconduct investigation. On Wednesday, the military police referred their investigation to Quebec's public prosecution service to determine whether to lay criminal charges.

On Thursday, she called the team overseeing the federal vaccination campaign a "well-oiled machine" and sought to reassure Canadians that the change in command at the top of the massive logistical effort will have no impact on the rollout of the COVID-19 jabs.

Brig.-Gen. Brodie was first seconded to the Public Health Agency of Canada in November, alongside Maj.-Gen. Fortin, to run vaccine distribution and logistics. The agency said she played a pivotal role in the vaccine effort and returned to the forces in February as the commander of Military Personnel Generation Group.

Brig.-Gen. Brodie joined the Canadian Armed Forces in 1989. During her time in the army, she has commanded platoons, a company and a battalion. She has been deployed to Croatia, Bosnia and Afghanistan. Brig.-Gen. Brodie also served with both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the United Nations. She is married with three children.

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